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ACTA MVSEI SABESIENSIS

Special Issue

RUSSIAN STUDIES

FROM THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES TO THE PRESENT DAY

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SLAVERY IN THE SOCIETY OF EARLY MEDIEVAL TURKS OF CENTRAL ASIA (BASED ON WRITTEN AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIALS)

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Tatiana Sergeevna PARSHIKOVA**

Introduction

Reconstructing former social systems is an important aspect of research into the history of nomadic societies. Study of this question is of great importance in identifying the mechanisms by which nomadic civilisations functioned. The social and political history of the early medieval Turks of Central Asia has been repeatedly approached by researchers. The majority of works are based on data from written sources such as Turkic runic texts and Chinese chronicles.¹ Besides this, there are also publications devoted to the analysis and social interpretation of archaeological materials.² However, despite a significant amount of research, many questions regarding the social history of early medieval Turks remain open. Among them, issues around the existence of slaves or dependent segments of the population in nomadic society in the second half of the first millennium AD is of particular interest. An in-depth analysis of this problem, taking into account new source materials, is presented in this article.

Materials and methods

For a long time, research into the social history of early medieval Turks was based only on the study of written sources - runic texts and Chinese dynastic chronicles. However these materials have a number of shortcomings, not least that opportunities for obtaining new information from their analysis have already been exhausted. Therefore, this study adopts other approaches, undertaking a social interpretation of findings

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¹ Mori 1967; Mori 1981; Czegledy 1972; Ecsedy 1972; Ecsedy 1988; Bastug 1999.

² Stark 2008; Seregin 2013b.

from the excavation of early medieval Turkic archaeological sites. These archaeological complexes can be divided into two types: funeral and ritual. The methodology of social interpretation is based upon the assumption that the materials of a monument built in honour of a dead person reflects that person's status. Theoretical and practical provisions for such work are laid out in detail in many research publications on this topic,³ and have previously been applied by the author of this article to the analysis of sites of early medieval Turks of Central Asia.⁴

When seeking evidence for the existence of slavery in nomadic society based on archaeological materials, one difficulty that arises is defining the criteria by which burials of dependent segments of the population can be identified. Helpfully, a number of studies by archaeologists present practical experience of interpreting excavated materials from this point of view. In Scythian burials investigated in various territories of Eurasia, the "dependent" status of the dead was defined by the following indicators: the unusual disposition of the buried person, his arrangement outside the main burial construction, a lack of inventory and the detection of burial sites for the poor near those for the rich.⁵ Obviously, unquestioning application of these criteria as they stand would be an incorrect approach to interpreting archaeological complexes of societies of other periods and regions. At the same time, it is expedient to accurately identify analogies, considering the universal nature of the development of nomadic societies across a wide chronological and territorial framework.

Results and discussion

Information contained in written sources (Chinese chronicles and Turkic texts) demonstrates that segments of the population in Turkic society were characterised by varying degrees of dependence. Various terms were used to designate slaves, probably reflecting the unequal positions they held and a clear differentiation in their degree of dependence. Military campaigns were one means of replenishing the number of dependent people in Turkic society.⁶ According to data from written sources, female slaves had great value.⁷

The fragmented and incomplete information obtainable from written sources on slavery's existence in early medieval Turk society demands

³ Binford 1971, p. 23; Tainter 1978, p. 105-141; Carr 1995, p. 178-190.

⁴ Seregin 2013b.

⁵ Ilyinskaya 1966, p. 166-167; Hazanov 1975, p. 134-135; Grach 1980, p. 48.

⁶ Bernshtam 1946, p. 117-126.

⁷ Kljastornyj 1985, p. 162-166.

further verification and specification through the analysis of archaeological materials. However, findings from excavations in Central Asia provide a very limited amount of information on the topic. Only a few complexes with characteristics that indicate the presence of a dependent population are known.

S. V. Kiselev⁸ suggests that some of the graves he excavated in the burial grounds Tuekta⁹ and Kuray-IV¹⁰ can be connected with slaves or dependent people. Proceeding from his descriptions, it is possible to divide the relevant objects into two groups. 1. Small stone embankments or rings located separately or around a large barrow or under its embankment; in most cases single burials but some including a horse. The inventory of other materials accompanying such finds is characteristically not numerous. 2. Burials of people accompanying the main grave of an “elite” barrow.

Unfortunately, full consideration of the designated materials and an assessment of Kiselyov’s conclusions are complicated by the fact that his results were published only partially. Therefore there remain questions connected with the cultural and chronological features of certain specific burial sites.

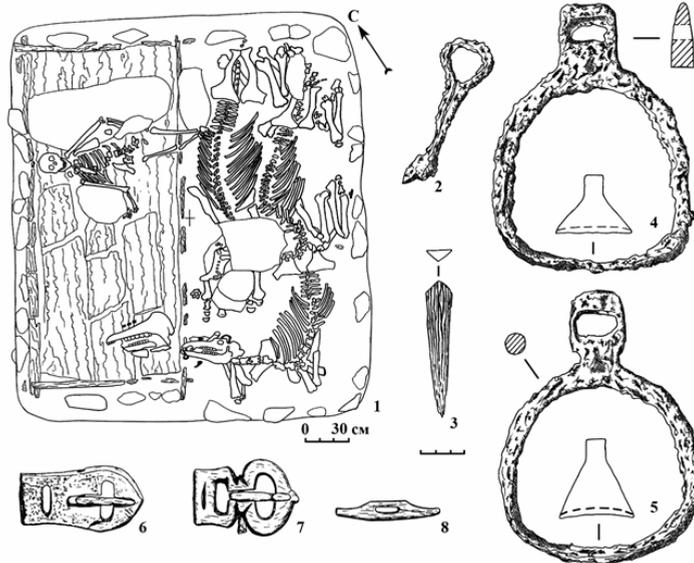


Fig. 1. Site Borotal-I, mound no. 50 (redrawn after Kubarev 1985, fig. 4).
1: plan of the grave; 2-8: fragments of horse-riding equipment from the burial

⁸ Kiselev 1949, p. 299-302.

⁹ Tuekta: burial ground located to the northeast of the village of Tuekta (Russia, Mountain Altai, Onguday area).

¹⁰ Kuray IV: burial ground located in the mountain region of Southern Altai, including some barrows.

A situation similar to that recorded by Kiselev was noted in elite barrow No. 1 at the Kuray-IV burial ground, during the excavation of the necropolis Borotal-I¹¹ (**fig. 1**). A cenotaph with accompanying burials lacking an inventory was investigated in one of the early medieval Turk barrows. According to V. D. Kubarev,¹² this burial illustrated the widely-distributed tradition of placing slaves or dependent people with dead notables in the Early Middle Ages.

The most indicative characteristics suggesting such finds related to slavery or dependents at this site were:

1. The atypical orientation of the burial; frame arranged across a sepulchral hole, without separate funeral camera (chamber), or outside the main design;
2. Lack of any inventory;
3. Burial not accompanied by a horse, an important indicator of “standard” burials in Turkic culture;
4. An “accompanying” type burial, within the grave of a representative of the Turkic elite.

It is important to note that these indicators are completely identical to those recorded by archaeologists during excavation of other sites from different chronological periods and across extensive territories.

Besides these finds, it is necessary to consider other early medieval Turkic complexes which indicate the existence of slavery. The interpretation of the inventory-less “accompanying” burials excavated on necropolises MarkelovMys-I and II, as well as those outside the boundaries of the main elite graves¹³ is still under discussion. Furthermore, some “inlet” burials which were not accompanied by the burial of a horse or other items of stock may relate to lower class representatives of early medieval Turkic populations.

One indirect factor confirming the existence of dependent segments of Turkic society is the rather high level of development in the nomads’ social system.¹⁴ It is necessary to emphasise that there are no fixed signs which can be said to accurately confirm the burial of a dependent individual, based on these archaeological remains. At the same time, the limited status of the dead person can be shown, for example, by his non-possession of a weapon, which was, judging by the available information,

¹¹ Kubarev 1985, p. 138-140, fig. 4.

¹² Ibid., p. 146-147.

¹³ Mitko, Teterin 1998, p. 402-403.

¹⁴ Seregin 2013b, p. 127-143.

one of the main indicators of an adult man in early medieval nomadic society.

It is impossible to exclude the possibility that the burial of dependent people in Turkic society is not reflected in archaeological finds, for various reasons. It is possible that a standard complex was not constructed for the burial of individuals of low social status, for example, that no mound embankment was built. In that case, the available materials are not representative and are of a selective character. The possibility that similar traditions existed in various societies and cultures has been repeatedly emphasised by archaeologists.¹⁵ This assumption has yet to be confirmed from the results of excavations of early medieval Turkic sites. However, the small number of burials of early medieval nomads in the Altai-Sayan region and Central Asia, compared to sites from other periods in that territory, as well as specifics of some child burial sites,¹⁶ can be connected with this circumstance.

Conclusions

The developed differentiation of society, indicated both in written sources and by certain indicators in burial complexes, makes it possible to assume the existence of a relatively small segment of the early medieval Turk nomad community whose position was characterised by a certain degree of dependence. It is necessary to emphasise that this dependence, in view of the challenging ethno-social conditions in Central Asia in the second half of the first millennium AD, could have been of various types, for example, military-political (the subordinated position of people seized during military campaigns, or the low status of ethnic minorities or animal breeders in the structure of nomadic empires, etc.), or economic (due to the impoverishment of some segments of the population).

Slavery in the Society of Early Medieval Turks of Central Asia (Based on Written and Archaeological Materials)

(Abstract)

This article concerns the question of the existence of slavery in the society of the early medieval Turks of Central Asia. The research is based on an integrated approach which assumes the correlation of analysed data from written and archaeological sources.

Segments of early medieval Turkic society could be characterised by varying degrees of dependence, according to Turkic texts and Chinese chronicles. Verifying these sources

¹⁵ Hazanov 1975, p. 135; Berseneva 2011, p. 42-46.

¹⁶ Seregin 2013a, p. 89-92.

through archaeological finds requires the definition of criteria for identifying burials of such dependents. Analysis of archaeological finds has identified a group of burial sites that differed from “standard” graves, defined by the low status the dead appeared to have held during their lifetime.

The most indicative features for the interpretation of such finds were: atypical orientation of the grave; frame arranged across a sepulchral hole, without a separate funeral camera (chamber) or placed outside the main grave complex; lack of any inventory; burial not accompanied by a horse (as per “standard burials” in nomadic Turkic culture); or burial accompanying that of an elite individual.

It is also necessary to consider other early medieval Turkic complexes which indicate the existence of slavery. The interpretation of “accompanying” burials with no inventory which are outside the boundaries of the main ‘elite’ burial complex remains under discussion. Furthermore, some “inlet” burials which were not accompanied by the burial of a horse or other items of stock may relate to lower class representatives of early medieval Turkic populations.

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Keywords: Turks, Early Middle Ages, social history, slavery, archaeological sites, Central Asia, written sources.